Oscar Delgado – General Manager MEA, Bristol Myers Squibb



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Bristol Myers Squibb's General Manager for the Middle East and Africa (MEA) Oscar Delgado outlines the company's pandemic journey, the big changes transforming the Saudi market, the challenges on regulatory data protection, and the opportunities to make Saudi Arabia a leader in clinical trials and innovation within the region.

Can you outline your prior experience and how it prepared you for your current role as GM for the MEA region?

Over the last 23 years I have been able to observe the evolution and growth of Bristol Myers Squibb to become one of the top pharma companies in the world. Bristol Myers Squibb has a strong belief in the power of science to address some of the most challenging diseases of our time.

I have worked in a variety of different geographies, starting my career in Spain and climbing the ladder to become financial director for Hungary and for the local representation of countries in Europe, including Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Iceland, and Malta and from 2016 General Manager. After almost two years in that role, I became general manager for BMS MEA operations in late 2018.

My experience has mostly been in European markets, but even within Europe there is a cornucopia of healthcare realities with different constraints, budgetary concerns, reimbursement systems, and patients. There are some similarities between the countries I managed in Europe and MEA, which is very diverse and a fast-growing region where each country has a different healthcare system.

At Bristol Myers Squibb, we are working primarily on the availability and affordability of innovative treatment options. When I came here two and a half years ago, our clear vision was to be recognized as a biopharma leader in the region, make all of our innovative medicines available to all patients in need, and leverage the diversity of cultures and nationalities to foster an environment of inclusion and innovation. All of this is only possible with a great team that holds the highest ethical standards and excellent partners supporting us.

How well developed is the company’s footprint in MEA?

BMS has been in the region for many years and has gone through several transformations. Today, we are present in 14 countries and all our employees are based in either the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia. There are countries where we have teams directly running the business and other countries where we work with local partners (Distributors or contract sales organization). In all of them, regardless of the type of presence, all the strategy and decisions are made by the teams based in Dubai and Riyadh.

How did the organization manage to continue operations during the pandemic?

2020 was an unprecedented year of several challenges for pharmaceutical companies to ensure that patients are served with our innovative drugs, despite various restrictions. Despite adversity, we worked hard to achieve our objective of securing drug supply to each and every patient, provided necessary education to healthcare professionals and kept our employees safe and healthy.

Our employees were working from home for three to six months before we returned to the office in July 2020, on an optional basis. Our sales reps had to shift from face-to-face to digital interactions to educate Healthcare Professionals (HCPs). We engaged HCPs gradually to avoid overwhelming them and followed different innovative channels to cascade product and scientific information.

I strongly believe that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. When the pandemic ends, we are not expecting to go 100% back to the way things were previously. While in the past, up to 100 percent of interactions were face-to-face, we expect a significant percentage to be virtual in the future. Meeting doctors and partners physically for a first interaction will remain important but some of the following communications can be done virtually.

What is the strategic significance of the Saudi market for Bristol Myers Squibb and how is the organization adapting to the Kingdom's objectives such as Vision 2030?

Saudi Arabia is a key country from a strategy perspective as the largest pharmaceutical market in the region. Bristol Myers Squibb has lent its full support to the Kingdom's 2030 Strategic Vision, and we are happy to see that the pharma industry has been recognized as a key industry for the future of its economy. Saudi Arabia wants to become a leader in innovation within the region. We have a scientific office in the country and are working with our partner to ensure that the Saudization strategy is achieved in a timely manner. Today, all of the sales representatives working for BMS therapies are Saudi nationals. We want to be part of the change.

Additionally, we work closely with the Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA) on capability building training for Saudi pharmacy students as one of our commitments on Vision 2030. It is a great learning opportunity for them to understand the different functions in the pharma industry.

Saudi Arabia is a large and very important country for us, its attractiveness should not be taken for granted; we are committed to continue serving Saudi patients by bringing value to the economy. To enable this, it is necessary to implement policies that create an environment in which biopharma companies can thrive.

There are a few elements that can make a difference, the first is having an adequate intellectual property (IP) system, including regulatory data protection that rewards the time and effort we put into generating the data for clinical trials. The second element is a good regulatory system that facilitates the approval of clinical trial applications and provides fast registration for the innovative medicines coming from our R&D efforts.

IP, in particular, is an area of concern for Bristol Myers Squibb and the industry in general. We welcome the commitment of Saudi authorities to improve the IP environment and recent work on IP protection, which is a good start, but there is still an opportunity to improve the regulatory data protection laws. Regulatory Data Protection (RDP) is not only about protecting against the

disclosure of the innovator’s data, underpinning regulatory approval by the SFDA, but also preventing the reliance on it by generic manufacturers.

Where in some cases local manufacturers take advantage of the innovator’s clinical data which should have Regulatory data protection (RDP) in place, this undermines the predictability and sustainability of Saudi Arabia in attracting further investments from the private sector

Has the feedback from Saudi authorities been positive in that regard?

We have engaged the authorities, including the SFDA and SAIP, with the cooperation of the associations, and I believe that we are moving in the right direction, but we are not yet where we should be.

Considering the robust pipeline of the company and Saudi Arabia’s push to attract more R&D, what do you see as the role of clinical trials to ensure that healthcare practitioners and patients get exposed to BMS innovations?

Over the past few years, Saudi Arabia has focused on localization in order to build up its local manufacturing footprint. These days, most companies, because of technology and supply efficiency, have rationalized their global footprint when it comes to production of innovative medicines. The best opportunities that the industry can create are not in manufacturing, but in clinical research; we acknowledge that there is a significant untapped potential in that area for Saudi Arabia.

Clinical trials can be an important value driver for the Saudi economy, but also for physicians and patients. However, if we are to create a big clinical trials footprint here, we need a regulatory environment that allows it, including in areas like IP/data protection. Pricing and reimbursement policies also have to reward innovation, which includes moving from a traditional reference price mechanism to a more value based approach to properly capture the benefits for patients, physicians and a health care system. We are also very determined to collaborate with the newly created Saudi Health Technology Assessment (SHTA) body to make this happen.

If all of these benchmarks are met, considering the country’s size, infrastructure and capabilities, I have no doubt that Saudi Arabia can become a regional leader in life sciences R&D.

What is the level of diagnosis and screening in Saudi Arabia and how big of a challenge is it to find patients?

Saudi Arabia is one of the most advanced countries in the region when it comes to diagnosis and screening and this is thanks to a very robust healthcare system and hospitals capabilities.

Post-Celgene acquisition, BMS is now one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies. How well is this new and enlarged BMS represented in the region?

Bristol Myers Squibb is in the business of breakthroughs, the kind of discoveries that transform patients' lives through science, delivering innovative medicines in oncology, hematology, immunology and cardiovascular diseases. We have one of the most promising pipelines in the industry and so our focus is more about the upcoming portfolio than the current one. The Celgene acquisition added strength and diversity to our innovative portfolio with an increased focus on hematology; the portfolios complemented each other quite well.

The portfolio also fits the needs of patients in the Middle East & Africa well. For example, beta thalassemia, a kind of inherited blood disorders, that has a high prevalence in countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

The Celgene integration began in Q4 of 2019 and continued in 2020, and we are now one company in the MEA region. In March of last year, we launched our new brand to reflect the mission, vision and values. The hand in our logo is a universal expression of healing, of giving, receiving care, and represents humanity.

What has motivated you to stay more than two decades at Bristol Myers Squibb?

I have been at the company for many years but today's Bristol Myers Squibb is not the same as the one I first encountered back in 1997; it has evolved a lot. It has almost been like working in different companies after all transformations. When I began, Bristol Myers Squibb had strong presence in retail, consumer, medical devices, Oncology with Taxol and AIDS products…., today the company's focus is on innovative life-saving medicines in Oncology, hematology, immunology and cardiovascular.

I have also been in different roles and locations, working in Spain, Portugal, Russia, Hungary, the Middle East and Africa, among others, so I have seen different industries up close. I am proud to be

at Bristol Myers Squibb because there are many opportunities to learn and grow, which promotes a very diverse and inclusive environment, and we share the same vision and goals and we share the same vision and goals; i) research and develop breakthrough therapies for all patients in need on devastating diseases ii) work with the best and talented team iii) work closely with policy makers, industry associations, and other stakeholders to accelerate access to innovative therapies and make them affordable.

> For Bristol Myers Squibb's MEA team, patient access to innovative medicines is what makes us come to work every day

To conclude, readers in other geographies might wonder if there are big opportunities in the Saudi market, which appears to be a transitional moment. How do you assess the opportunities in the next five to ten years and what role will Saudi Arabia play in the regional pharma market?

If we reflect on the few pillars I mentioned, there is still some work that needs to be done to get to the next level. The whole industry and regulators have to work together to make improvements in IP and RDP, streamlining of regulatory approval for clinical trials and registration of new assets, and move to a value-based approach when it comes to pricing and reimbursement.

Saudi Arabia is one of the countries within the region working very heavily on it and definitely moving in the right direction. For instance, we acknowledge the efforts to build Health Technology Assessment capabilities.

Once those pillars are addressed, I have no doubt that Saudi Arabia will become the most important country in the region and will be a leader in innovation as they have the people, the capabilities and the vision.

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